

MAKING YOUR SOUL THANKFUL

I THESSALONIANS 5:18

Rev. Roy Herman

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Good evening, Trinity church! I am so blessed to be here tonight and truly give thanks to the Lord for allowing me to serve him and you, too! And I pray that your Thanksgiving celebration was as wonderful as mine.

Without question, as we grow older, we experience increasing forgetfulness. We forget where we put our keys or our glasses and sometimes we even forget where we are! And it seems that shortly after a time of remembrance; we forget what we are supposed to remember. And often times, we forget to be thankful for what our Lord and Savior has done and is doing in our lives.

The great author, Robert Louis Stevenson once stated: "the man who has forgotten to be thankful has fallen asleep in life."

Tonight, we are going to focus on the words of the Apostle Paul, who never allowed this to happen to him. He was not only a prayerful prisoner, but he was a praiseful prisoner. He was first in line in offering to God his gratitude.

You know, it's easy to celebrate Thanksgiving when your family is healthy, your income is ample, your stocks are growing in value, your favorite team is victorious, your sinuses have dried-up, and your aches and pains are minimal. But that kind of Thanksgiving can be very superficial. God is sometimes forgotten in such a celebration. It's often just a matter of congratulating ourselves on how well we have done.

But real Thanksgiving, biblical Thanksgiving, is much greater and deeper than that. It is based not on our circumstances, but on God's sufficiency; not on our production, but on God's provision; not on our performance, but on God's providence. Paul described real Thanksgiving with this admonition from 1 Thessalonians 5 and 18: "give thanks in all circumstances, for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus".

Let's pray

In Paul's epistles, he uses the verb and noun denoting Thanksgiving over forty times showing us just how important it is to be thankful. Here are just a few passages taken from his letters to the church in Thessalonica:

(I Thessalonians 1:2): "we always thank God for all of you, mentioning you in our prayers."

(I Thessalonians 2:13a): "and we also thank God continually."

(I Thessalonians 3:9): "how can we thank God enough for you in return for all the joy we have in the presence of our God because of you?"

(II Thessalonians 1:3): "we ought always to thank God for you, brothers, and rightly so, because your faith is growing more and more, and the love every one of you has for each other is increasing."

These passages truly show his spirit of gratitude as it flows from his heart.

One commentator put it this way: "Paul is dressed in the "garment of praise."" He wore gratitude as a man wears a suit. The graces of praise and gratitude were woven into the fabric of his life." What a beautiful description of the life of Paul, isn't it? He was indeed a praiseful Christian.

On this post-Thanksgiving Sunday, you and I also need to be clothed with this grace of giving thanks. We must exhibit it before others. For most of us are long on our complaints and short on our praises. If you really want to do something transforming this season of the year, go up to that person you had been complaining about and praise them. Let them know how much you appreciate what they are doing for Christ. Let them know you will be praying for them.

Let us now come to grips with the words of our text and the title of this message, "Making Your Soul Thankful."

Consider, to begin with, the requirement for us to be thankful. Many believers treat this matter of gratitude very lightly. Yet notice the commanding words of Paul: "give thanks in all circumstances". My friends, this is God's will for each one of us according to this beloved Apostle.

If this be the case, and it is, then I ask: where are all the people whom God almighty has prospered, only to be pushed aside by an ungrateful spirit, feeling no obligation, whatsoever, to offer thanks to God. Listen, millions of Americans sat down this Thanksgiving for a delicious meal, without bowing their heads to offer thanks to our sovereign God. And that is to our disgrace!

But please note, my friends that Paul puts this grace of giving thanks among those required graces that make for an attractive life. Let me read what Paul said just prior to his commandment in verse 18. He writes in verses 14-17: "and we urge you, brothers, warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

Make sure that nobody pays back wrong for wrong, but always try to be kind to each other and to everyone else. Be joyful always; pray continually”.

Notice that the Apostle Paul does not change the tense of the verb, but still in the imperative mood he writes in verse 18: "give thanks in all circumstances."

This is an ongoing, never ending, exhortation and commandment for us to not dwell on the adversity of the circumstance, but to look to see how God is working in our life and thank him for his grace and love.

Giving thanks is an eternal command, as John in his vision saw the twenty-four elders falling on their faces, worshipping God saying: "we give thanks to you, Lord God almighty, the one who is and who was, because you have taken your great power and have begun to reign."

On this day, we need to realize, as never before, that we are obligated to be thankful. We owe it to God to be grateful to him for all of the blessings and benefits of this life, let alone our future life in glory. May God help us to see the duty of having a thankful heart and grateful spirit! When we fully realize exactly what God has done for us, the duty to give thanks will not be a burden. It will become a joy and delight.

But Paul realizes that some will not give thanks as he commands. In Ephesians 5 and verses 15-29, he gives us this admonition: “be very careful, then, how you live--not as unwise but as wise, making the most of every opportunity, because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what the Lord's will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery. Instead, be filled with the spirit. Speak to one another with psalms, hymns and spiritual songs. Sing and make music in your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

"Give thanks in all circumstances." is the rendering of the NIV. But i also like the way some of the other translations present these words: Phillips has it: "whatever the circumstances may we give thanks." Weymouth puts it: "in every circumstance of life be thankful." The NASB says: “in everything give thanks.” And the Living Bible states: "no matter what happens, always be thankful."

Now Paul is not teaching that we, as believers, should thank God for everything that happens to us. Evil, sickness, disease and death all came into the world because of sin. They did not come from God, but he can use them. But notice what Paul states: "in all circumstances." When these things strike us we can still be thankful for God can bring glory and good out of all things. Remember Paul’s promise from Romans 8:28: “and we know that in all things God works for the good of those who love him, who have been called according to his purpose.”

I would suspect that Paul's commitment to "always giving thanks" was, in-part, a result of his understanding of Jewish teaching — he knew the ancient writings, that which we call the Old Testament.

Remember that Paul studied under one of the greatest Pharisaical Rabbi's, Gamaliel and was, in fact, a son of a Pharisee and a Pharisee, himself. Surely he knew the psalm's of David and Asaph and their recognition for the need to always give thanks to God.

David wrote in Psalm 30 and verses 10-12: "hear, o Lord, and be merciful to me; o Lord, be my help. You turned my wailing into dancing; you removed my sackcloth and clothed me with joy, that my heart may sing to you and not be silent. O Lord my God, i will give you thanks forever."

Then in 118:28-29: "you are my God, and I will give you thanks; you are my God, and I will exalt you. Give thanks to the Lord, for he is good; his love endures forever."

And Asaph penned in Psalm 75, verse 1: "we give thanks to you, o God, we give thanks, for your name is near; men tell of your wonderful deeds."

The compelling idea here is that the heart is to overflow in gratitude to God for everything he brings into our lives. This is the range of our Thanksgiving. Paul knew nothing of an ungrateful and bitter spirit. Now what was the secret that enabled Paul to make such a statement? We find it in the latter part of verse 18: "for this is God's will for you in Christ Jesus." There you have his secret: "in Christ Jesus." We know this to be true as Jesus, himself, reminds us in John, chapter 5 and verse 15: "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."

Listen, my friend, God's will is only made in Christ, and it is in Christ that believers are given the dynamic that enables them to carry out God's divine will of giving thanks in all things. For it is only in Jesus Christ, the one who formed and fashioned his own life with a spirit of Thanksgiving, that we will be able to thank God for all things.

Notice how Christ adapted himself to the custom of always having a thankful soul. When the people rejected him, he still offered praise to God. In the upper room we find Christ thanking God for the seven loaves and few fish given him to feed a hungry multitude. And what about the cross as a symbol of gratitude that flowed from his lips? Christ declared: "Father, I thank thee."

What a gracious spirit of gratitude our Lord possessed. Here I am reminded of a certain Christian lady who was an invalid and confined to her bed for many years.

We find her saying: "oh, I am so happy and thankful because if the weather stays clear, in two weeks I may be able to go outside for half an hour." What an inner disposition of gratitude.

Then, there are the words of Matthew Henry who wrote in his diary after being attacked by thieves and robbed of his money: "let me be thankful first, because I was never robbed before; second, because although they took my purse, they did not take my life; third, because although they took my all, it was not much; and fourth, because it was I who was robbed, not I who robbed."

So in everything we are to give thanks.

Having looked at the requirement for being thankful and the range of our Thanksgiving, let us consider finally, the reason for our gratitude. Notice again the words: "give thanks." But why? Let me mention three reasons why Paul had such a spirit of Thanksgiving.

First, for God's indescribable gift: Paul the Apostle wrote: "thanks be to God for his indescribable gift" (II Corinthians 9:15). Paul could never stop praising God for giving him the greatest of gifts — the Lord, Jesus Christ — who forgives sins and remakes lives into something beautiful and useful.

Secondly, for God's unlimited provision: Paul writes to the Romans in chapter 14 verse 6 these words: "he who eats meat, eats to the Lord, for he gives thanks to God; and he who abstains, does so to the Lord and gives thanks to God." Paul knew that it is God who gives life its support, its hope, its strength and its nourishment. And what Paul realized, we too must realize, that everything we have in life comes from the hand of God.

It has been estimated that two-thirds of the world's population go to bed hungry every night. Whereas we who live in America, with its overflowing prosperity and production have so much for which we should thank God. Did we sit at our Thanksgiving table without humbly praising and thanking God for all of his blessings? Oh, how I pray not!

And lastly, for God's unforgettable victory: Listen to Paul as he cries out to the church in Corinth; "but thanks be to God! He gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (I Corinthians 15:57).

Here Paul is thankful to God for the eternal triumph of Christ over the condemnation of sin and the power of death. Christ has now lifted us out of the pit of despair into the everlasting arms of God. Praise his holy name! Amen?

There you have it, declares Paul, the reason for my eternal gratitude to God — for his indescribable gift, his unlimited provision, and finally, his unforgettable victory.

Oh, my friends let us begin to cultivate a similar feeling of gratitude within our souls. And then we will know intimately what an unknown author meant by the statement: "God has two dwellings; one in heaven, and the other in a meek and thankful heart."

And so he does! May we have a thankful soul in which he may dwell. Amen!

Prayer